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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: MARINE EXPEDITIONARY UNIT EXERCISE TO ENHANCE JOINT OPERATIONS AND PROVIDE HUMAN RIGHTS TRAINING

REF: STATE 133715

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

SUMMARY AND ACTION REQUEST

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¶1. (C) A Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) Exercise is scheduled to take place in Sri Lanka October 22 to November ¶2. Embassy has requested that it include a significant human rights training component. We believe the exercise represents a valuable exercise opportunity for our forces and a chance for the U.S. to improve the Sri Lankan military's human rights performance. It is consistent with our policy of helping the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) to defend itself in its fight against LTTE terrorism. In light of President Rajapaksa's initiative to develop a Human Rights Commission with US and other international observers, post believes we can gain more by engaging than pulling back. Post recommends Department concur to proceed with the MEU. End Summary.

PLANNED EXERCISE TO HAVE SIGNIFICANT HUMAN RIGHTS COMPONENT

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¶2. (C) In March 2006, planning began for a Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) exercise in Sri Lanka with the Sri Lanka Army (SLA). The exercise is scheduled to take place October 22 to November 2 and will consist of 375 Marines from the Fox and Golf Companies, 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit, Camp Pendleton who will be en route aboard the USS Dubuque and USS Comstock to deployment in Iraq. Under Operation Sama Shakthi, 300 Marines will conduct training with the SLA in low-to-medium conflict intensity operations in an urban insurgency environment at the SLA Commando Training Center in Kuda Oya and 75 Marines will conduct training at the PACOM-funded International Peacekeeping Training School in Kukule Ganga. Both locations are in southern Sri Lanka in sites that are not visible to the public. Kuda Oya is 38 km from Hambantota. A beach landing at Hambantota has been identified as the best method of embarkation for the Marines. Disembarkation and embarkation will be visible to the public in Hambantota, where Embassy public affairs staff will be on site to provide support. No adverse public reaction is expected. The 15th MEU will simultaneously stage an exercise in the Maldives.

¶3. (C) Embassy Colombo has informed the 15th MEU that final approval of Sama Shakthi is contingent upon Department concurrence and the inclusion of a human rights component in the training to underline the importance the USG attaches to adherence to international human rights best practices by the Sri Lankan military. Sama Shakthi comprises activities that broadly support human rights objectives. The exercise will cover law of war, rules of engagement, and training in escalation of force. Unit leaders, many of whom have prior combat experience in Iraq, will brief and demonstrate

tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) used for target identification, appropriate escalation of force, and enemy prisoner of war and detainee handling. During live fire events, proper target identification will be stressed to U.S. Marines and Sri Lankan counterparts. The MEU will use the army commando urban training site to teach Sri Lankan units U.S. TTPs for cordon and search operations, including clearing areas when searching for intelligence and weapons caches while not causing unnecessary harm or inconvenience to inhabitants. Examples of TTPs include:

- Ensuring that a household member is present when searching his/her home in order to verify that the service member conducting the search did not damage or steal property;
- Use of female soldiers to search and handle other females in order to not offend the local population;
- Proper handling and documentation of materials related to enemy activity to ensure that evidence is admissible in a court of law;
- Use of minimum force to achieve desired military objectives;
- Adherence to measures that minimize collateral damage;
- Mission accomplishment with minimum casualties; and
- Measures to deal with and prevent suicide bomb attacks.

#### PREPARING THE GROUND

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¶4. (C) Hambantota and the surrounding area benefited from USG relief and reconstruction assistance following the December 2004 tsunami. For this exercise, the Embassy has asked the 15th MEU to develop a community service project, undertaken during Sama Shakthi, that would provide additional benefits to the residents of Hambantota. ODC chief is scheduled to travel October 4 to Hambantota to coordinate with the town's mayor on logistics so that the disembarkation

and embarkation of exercise participants go smoothly and do not inconvenience local residents and to discuss possible community service projects.

#### AN OPPORTUNITY AND AN OPENING

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¶5. (C) The Embassy, ODC Chief and DATT support this exercise as an important exercise opportunity for our forces, as a chance for the USG to support the GSL in the war on terrorism, and as an opening to promote better human rights practices by Sri Lanka's armed forces. Mil-mil engagement strengthens the SLA's ability to defend itself against LTTE terrorism, complementing other USG initiatives, including listing the LTTE as a Foreign Terrorist Organization and encouraging other nations to do the same, establishing a contact group to cut off arms and finance to the LTTE, and the August 2006 FBI sting operation that led to the arrest of several LTTE operatives attempting to purchase weapons. At the same time, the exercise provides our Marines a live fire training opportunity before going to duty in Iraq, promotes interoperability between U.S. and Sri Lankan armed forces, and honors the USG's commitment to strengthen Sri Lanka's military capabilities in the face of renewed LTTE violence (reftel).

#### BETTER TO ENGAGE THAN PULL BACK

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¶6. (C) Sri Lanka's security forces have come under heavy international criticism in recent months following allegations of human rights violations in several high-profile incidents. These include allegations, denied by the GSL, of Sri Lankan military responsibility for the August 2006 murder in Muttur of 17 Muslim employees of the French NGO Action Against Hunger; the August 2006 bombing of a facility, which the GSL claims was an LTTE training center, in which an estimated 60 teenagers and young adults were killed; the January 2006 murder of five students in Trincomalee; and the December 2005 assassination of a pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance member of Parliament in Batticaloa. It is indisputable that the human rights record

of Sri Lankan security forces have over the years has been poor. For exactly this reason, we believe it is imperative to work, including at the mil-mil level, with the Sri Lankans to improve their human rights practices.

**¶7. (C)** The GSL recently has signaled its commitment to improve its human rights performance. President Rajapaksa announced earlier this month that the GSL will form a Sri Lankan human rights commission to investigate human rights allegations and make appropriate recommendations. This mission will include international representatives, selected in consultation with Amnesty International, the U.N. Human Rights Council, the USG and others. Senior Department officials welcomed this initiative in meetings with President Rajapaksa and Foreign Minister Samaraweera at the recent UN General Assembly. We believe it is in our interest to engage the Sri Lankans, including the armed forces, in a collaborative manner to push for better human rights practices. To abruptly cancel a long-planned military exercise at this late stage would send the wrong signal at a time when the GSL is taking tangible high level steps to respond to allegations of human rights abuses.

**¶8. (C)** This would be the first-ever MEU in Sri Lanka, opening possibilities for future exercises that benefit both countries. Several hundred Marines were on the ground in Sri Lanka in early 2005 to assist in tsunami relief, generating significant good will. The U.S. military has conducted seminars on counter-terrorism and peacekeeping. There was no adverse reaction from the LTTE, nor other political fallout. The LTTE has used any number of excuses in the past to stay away from peace talks. While it is not out of the question that they could use the MEU as a pretext to boycott future talks, in post's view, it is more likely that the MEU, by demonstrating U.S. resolve to train the Sri Lankan army to defend itself aggression, would, in fact, hasten the LTTE's return to talks. In a meeting with Ambassador Blake on September 29, the Indian Ambassador concurred with our position that while a political solution of the conflict is the only viable way forward, the Government of India also supports militarily the GSL's obligation to defend itself militarily against the LTTE. We do not anticipate negative GOI reaction to the MEU taking place in Sri Lanka. Note that if the SLA ignores our calls for restraint and engages in significant offensive actions between now and when the MEU takes place, we may recommend cancellation of the exercise. The Ambassador made this point in an October 3 meeting (to be reported septel) with Defense Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Foreign Secretary Palihakkara, who said they "completely understood."

#### AMBASSADOR PRESSES HUMAN RIGHTS WITH SERVICE CHIEFS

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**¶9. (C)** In meetings on September 25 with Air Chief Marshall Perrera, Army Commander General Fonseka, and Navy Commander Vice Admiral Karannagoda, Ambassador Blake stressed that while the U.S. is committed strongly to helping Sri Lanka in its fight against LTTE terrorism through military and law enforcement cooperation, a failure by the military to respect human rights could jeopardize military cooperation (septel). The Ambassador also made this point with President Rajapaksa in their first meeting on September 9 after he presented credentials and we continue to do so at every opportunity.

#### MEDIA PLAN

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**¶10. (U)** Embassy does not plan to publicize the Sama Shakti exercise in advance. Following is proposed press guidance for use on an if-asked basis, in combination with exercise-specific guidance to be provided by the 15th MEU. A short press release will be issued at the time of the exercise. Schedule permitting, the Ambassador plans to attend the opening on October 23, along with Sri Lankan Secretary of Defense Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

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Q: Why are you supporting the Sinhalese Army in their war against the Tamils?

A: More than 20 years of fighting have shown that neither side can achieve a military solution to this conflict. That is why the United States and the Co-chairs have consistently called on the LTTE and the GSL to seek a political solution. We are supporting the Sri Lankan armed forces to defend Sri Lanka and become a more capable and professional force for the benefit of all communities.

¶Q. Why are you training the Sinhalese to attack the Tamils?

A: The purpose of our military assistance programs has always been to help Sri Lanka defend itself and discourage the LTTE from pursuing military operations. We have consistently stated our conviction that no military solution to the conflict is possible and that the only sustainable solution is a negotiated settlement.

Q: How can you support a government that regularly violates the human rights of its citizens?

A: We have made clear our concern about human rights violations by both sides in this conflict. President Rajapaksa has called for a human rights commission with the active participation of independent international observers to investigate recent major human rights violations in Sri Lanka. We support this initiative and will be watching its progress.

This exercise will include training on the laws of war, rules of engagement, and the proportional use of force. The Marines of the 15th MEU will demonstrate how every member of the armed forces is personally responsible for upholding these and other core values of their organization. The United States does not tolerate the abuse of human rights by its own armed forces, as demonstrated by a consistent record of investigating, prosecuting and, where the evidence supports it, convicting those individuals who have done so.

Q: Did the 15th MEU participate in the slaughter of Iraqis in Fallujah?

A: During Operation Iraqi Freedom, the 15th MEU provided humanitarian assistance to the local population of An Nasiriyah that included purification of drinking water and doctor/corpsman-assisted medical care. The MEU supported the establishment of local governance, including police and other local services, in addition to continuing to conduct airborne surveillance and direct-action raids on the ground to seek out and capture any Ba'ath Party or Fedayeen resistance.

The 15th MEU has a distinguished history of humanitarian assistance, including providing disaster relief in Sri Lanka and Sumatra following the tsunami of late 2004. In other examples, in 2001 they provided security and clean water in East Timor; and ten years earlier, following the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo in 1991, they assisted in the evacuation of the Philippines.

ACTION REQUESTED

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¶11. (C) Embassy requests Department's concurrence to proceed with the planned October 22-November 2 Sama Shakthi exercise.  
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